



QUARANTINE LETTERS

ILL WILL

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AS PANDEMIC LOCKDOWNS were implemented in March of 2020, *All Will* launched an epistolary exchange between comrades around the globe. In addition to keeping lines of communication open, we sought to produce a partisan representation of the graduated spectrum of biosecurity governance as it expressed itself locally. The letters we received from across the USA, as well as Canada, France, and Chile paint a rich and diverse portrait of the suspended economies of desire and rebellion that served to define the spring before the storm.

#1

DESTITUTION, INTERRUPTED

AUGUST & KORA

1.

The theorists have agreed: the current interruption is the outcome of well-established logics of capital, crisis governance, and alienation. Giorgio Agamben writes, “humans have become so accustomed to living under conditions of perennial crisis and emergency that they do not seem to realize that their life has been reduced to a purely biological condition stripped not only of all social and political dimensions, but likewise of its human and affective dimensions.” An article in *Lundimatin* on March 19 insisted that “the economy is the devastation”, but whereas this was “a theory before last month...now it is a fact.” Another article from the same issue reminded us that “the catastrophe is always already here”—from the floods and fires of California, to the atmospheric asphyxiation of non-human life, to the warming oceans and melting icecaps—and, if there is a difference today, it is only that “we are now obliged to open our eyes.” Finally, as if to carry this logic to its outer limits, a recent letter from Jacques Camatte proposed that “what we are

now witnessing is the outcome of [a] vast phenomenon that has developed over thousands of years, stretched between the two great moments during which the threat of extinction asserted itself.”¹ The Coronavirus, it would seem, is nothing other than the protracted outcome of civilization itself.

While it is certainly right to insist that conditions of the present are an extension of the conditions of the past, this chorus of continuity misses something essential. Our world is certainly decomposing, but the song is not exactly the same.

Two years ago, a friend stated that, “the constitutive heterogeneity of the real is given to us under the mask of unity, homogeneous unity. To superficial perception, the *mask* is the real itself. To allow the mask to falter, is therefore to risk vertigo.”² In January, this mask still resembled the form it had assumed in recent years: a tumultuous but for the most part intelligible field of global political polarizations. The world, and our place within it, still felt within reach.

By March, the ruling institutions had been forced into a roundly reactive posture. It is by no means clear that the Coronavirus can be compared to a typical economic crisis or natural disaster, nor has the response been limited to an ordinary state of exception. After all, at least for a moment, rulers and ruled alike were pushed on to the back foot, their certainties shaken, as the virus usurped the position of global antagonist. Institutions on which the reproduction of this world depends have been perfunctorily suspended: employment, imprisonment for misdemeanors, evictions; even the DOW Jones seems up for grabs.

The dislocation of the social fabric has been far deeper than anything we have known. The veneer of normalcy fell away at a shocking speed. Actions that were once the very substance of normalcy now feel like experiments. And if we are honest, the ethical and political lines are *not* exactly what they used to be.

1. Giorgio Agamben, “Clarifications,” published on the column *Una voce*, on Quodlibet. it website; (Anonymous), “Coronavirus: Apocalypse and Redemption,” *Lundimatin* #234, March 19, 2020; Anonymous, “What the Virus Said,” *Lundimatin* #234, March 19, 2020; Jacques Camatte, “Letter to a Friend in the North,” 3.20.2020.

2. Moses Debruska, “Preface,” in Josep Raffael i Ora, *Fragmenter le monde* (Paris: Divergences, 2018), 19. Our translation.

2.

Three months ago, what concerned us and much of the world was the tally of forty-seven countries: the newspapers announced “a new global wave of revolt.” From France to Hong Kong, riots, occupations and blockades erupted with a ferocity and longevity unknown in living memory.

Successful revolts do not only undermine existing powers—they also allow their participants a capacity to participate more fully in the world. If we have come to think of revolt as a *destituent* force, this is not only because revolt splinters and fragments the social fabric into asymmetrical camps, but also because it returns us to earth, placing us in *contact* with reality. *Destitution* is rightly thought of either as a double movement or as a single process with two sides. On the one hand, it refers to the emptying-out of the fictions of government (its claim to universality, impartiality, legality, *consensus*); on the other hand, a restoration of the positivity and fullness of experience. The two processes are linked like the alternating sides of a Möbius strip: wherever those usually consigned to existing as spectators upon the world (the excluded, the powerless) instead suddenly become party to their situation, active participants in an ethical polarization, the ruling class is invariably drawn into the polarization and cannot avoid exhibiting its partisan character. The police become one more gang among gangs.

Needless to say, our situation today is different. We are living through a halfway *destitution*, a *destitution* interrupted. Every party has returned to earth—yet without entering a world. The advent of COVID-19 has drained standard narratives and roles of their force. The logics holding this world together have been revealed as the arbitrary and mechanical operations that they are. Yet because it was neither “we” nor “they” who pulled the e-brake, but a perfectly inhuman virus, the standstill of historical time lacks the festival that usually accompanies it—the collective intelligence and confidence that comes with being the agent plunging normal time into disorder. In the absence of an agent, the truth of this moment remains stubbornly negative: our lives materially prostrate to supply chains as far flung as they are brittle, our world a conduit of reciprocally perilous immunity and disease.

3.

Under ‘normal’ circumstances, participants in political events are never solely agents, but always also patients at the same time—we affect and are affected, we are changed by what we do and what is done to us, whether by police or one another. To have an active hand in our own deposition, to become anyone by participating in a common power with no name, is the mark of those movements and moments of eruption we’ve felt close to over recent years.

By contrast, our one-sided passivity in the face of this global event generates a vertiginous sense of being outpaced by the change around us. To be patients but not agents has meant that the dislocation of social life has occurred at a speed that makes it all but impossible to metabolize.

In their 1956 text, “A User’s Guide to *Détournement*,” Debord and Wolman observe that the subversive power of a *détournement* is “directly related to the conscious or semiconscious recollection of the original contexts of the elements.” This dependency of subversion on the memory of the subverted is not limited to the case of art but is, they argue, merely “a particular case of a general law” applicable to all action upon the world.

If the radical interruption of normal life we are undergoing has been so disorienting, this is because it is unfolding like a botched *détournement*, one whose force or potential is neutralized by its very radicality. We are swept into the new with such disarming speed that we cannot recall what preceded it. The tissue of normal life has been punctured, yet the cancellation was so rapid that we have been unable to register the distance traveled between the “original contents” of normal life and the world we now inhabit: a violence too sudden, too terrible even to be liberating, numbs us to the subversive effects it nevertheless carries out. The upending of the world becomes a strangely pacified process, reduced to a disorienting and disempowering experience: an inhuman velocity, less an event than a *jump-cut*, an excision of memory, a vertical severing of time itself.

In the long run, the vertigo will settle into more acute polarization. When it does, our inability to recalibrate will play to the benefit of the ruling powers. It insulates them against the subversive shock of what the virus has compelled them to do—less by the

so-called “Corona socialism” than by the radical *demobilization* of the labor force that has accompanied it. Meanwhile, we float in an empty time; unable to seize upon and decide it, we wait for the suspension of history to reach its conclusion.

However, as Furio Jesi understood well, suspended time often requires a “cruel sacrifice” before it can conclude itself.³ If our only experience of this event is as a “blip” of confusion and panic amidst an unbroken chain of administered life, when the time finally comes for an imperial reboot, the reversion to normalcy (or worse) will find no argument or exteriority to oppose it. That we remain dazed and out of step with the world gives our enemies free reign to reintroduce historical time on terms amenable uniquely to them, as the recent murders of activists during the quarantine lockdown in Columbia have already begun to attest.⁴

For now—at least for a moment—we are all here on earth, in the desert solitude of collective uncertainty:

To have been on earth just once—that’s irrevocable. / And so we keep on going and try to realize it, try to hold it in our simple hands, in our overcrowded eyes, and in our speechless heart.
(Rilke)

However paradoxical, perhaps our task over the coming weeks is to slow down the pace of change, to impose a rhythm allowing us to participate once again in the subversion and reinvention of the world on our own terms.

—August and Kora
Chicago, March 24, 2020

3. “Every true change in the experience of time is a ritual that demands...a *determinate* cruel sacrifice.” Furio Jesi, *Spartakus. The Symbology of Revolt*, Trans. Alberto Toscano (Seagull, 2014), 61-63.

4. “Colombian death squads exploiting coronavirus lockdown to kill activists.” Joe Parkin Daniels for The Guardian

#2

INTERRUPTION, SUSPENDED

ORION

Dear friends,

I thank you for your reflections on the ongoing pandemic. To respond to your question: Did anything really change? What is the nature of this suspension introduced by the COVID-19? Today is January 93rd, Year 0. The weather reminds me of Spring, there are bees and butterflies, birds, people are outside wandering on the sides of streets, construction workers are still hard at work fixing roads, building new condos, though now more than ever it is unclear who will afford to live in them, and whether they won't just sit empty for the next 2 to 3 years. Despite the circumstances at hand it is not uncommon to glimpse the sense of relief in the expressions of many of the youth running through the neighborhood with their friends laughing, talking, freed from the burdens of school. How now more than ever such displays of levity seem banished from the world for good. By nightfall the sense of living in total darkness will again prevail, surely, just as before.

Even if in all the political scenarios we'd imagined for ourselves going into 2020—the elections, the possibility of a wave

of revolt beginning to sweep across North America once again, the certainty that some kind of disaster would surely happen, even if we'd never once considered the possibility of a pandemic, we can't say that we were completely unprepared for something like this to happen. Or, we're completely unprepared for the situation, but our reflexes have proved adaptable. Some of our friends have gone full prepper—inevitable, really. It's similar to the surprise we felt after Trump got elected. Our lesson is the same—we continue to find ourselves in situations that are not of our choosing or liking. We are called to respond, which does not mean reacting. This does not mean that we shouldn't prepare, but that we must bear in mind that, "a force can, through acting, increase another that is acting in the opposite direction" (Benjamin); in other words, we cannot count on the outputs of invariant procedures anymore, including our own. We have to be water.

From my perspective, the virus makes clear two political limits we have continually run into, which some of us wrote about in 2019: firstly, that the democratic party will try to co-opt any popular revolutionary movement (AOC and all manner of politicians endorsing rent suspensions, or UBI etc.); and secondly, that our political ambitions will become essentially no different than providing for people's basic needs in the face of a situation in which hundreds of thousands of people in this country are going to be left to die at the hands of failing state institutions. In this way, I don't know that the virus frees us from any traps we were in before.

"Successful revolts do not only undermine existing powers, they also allow their participants a capacity to participate more fully in the world", you wrote in "Destitution, Interrupted." I'm wondering what implications this has for the virus. To me it seems like an attempt to set up an analogy between the effects of the contagion of revolt and those of the contagion of the virus. So when you say we are living in a 'half-destitution' I wonder if this formulation is the result of an inconsistency between 2 different conceptions of 'destitution': 1. destitution as a natural tendency inherent within constituted powers (and in this sense comparable to crisis tendencies in capital) and 2. a constituent power as the form class war takes when it takes aim at an entire civilization. The latter implies a renewed capacity to act, while this is not the case in the former. There's been so many

takes about the virus—is it humans, or is it capitalism, etc. If neither of these alternatives seem to me satisfactory, this is because the virus shows that neither humans nor capitalism are truly sovereign in this situation. The virus has constructed its own temporality, which immobilizes everything. As our friend the biologist said, only the virus was capable of extending beyond what the insurrections proved incapable of doing, and actually shutting down the economy.

Our age is significant because the conditions that make life on earth possible are being called into question. That our species evolved within a certain temperature range is significant. That we have reduced the world to a single desert has made us susceptible to the predation of a monstrous entanglement, and that is significant. Confronted with the disaster unfolding both at a planetary scale (the climate catastrophe) and at micro-biological level (the invisible itself), everything we leverage in this situation will be tragic from the outset, incommensurate to the suffering that will follow. This is significant. In a way, we perform our own ban, our own suspension when we conceive of life in the moment of revolt as interruption or suspension of capital or normality (which is death-as-life). In other words, if we think that what happens in revolt is a more authentic experience, that leaves us unprepared for making sense of tragedies like the one we're in, and this will surely blind us. The fact that there is not enough infrastructure in this country to care for all the people that need it is significant. This is a fissure we cannot cover over with weak conceptions of happiness, or hopes of "participating more fully".

It is so clear to me that we have—despite all of this—the chance to reintroduce something like a global proletarian movement. The common ground is there, especially after 2019, but it needs to be distilled into forms that will enable us to truly be resilient in the face of these disasters, and not crumble when the economy does (though this is inevitable given our dependency). This means developing the capacity to coordinate resources trans-regionally, organizing people reliably at a large scale without this ever taking the form of a hegemonic or sovereign power. It is so clear that information is the most valuable thing amidst this crisis, that being a reliable source of information is one of the main tasks our movements will face in the future. This new episteme of information has so far remained

neglected. Beyond that, we will continue just as before: trying to effectively produce the things we need outside of the economy while in turn impairing the latter severely, preparing ourselves to catch those who wander away from this world, as so many will have nowhere else to turn. Local struggles will certainly encounter limits in upturning a global problem. Yet they gesture towards each other, this is unmistakable. Their rhythms synchronize, bursting into chorus ever more often. This is why coordination at an international level is key to our moment.

And yet as real as this chance to stop the devastation of the planet and build a more free world feels from inside quarantine, at other times it seems like every other missed opportunity—a mirage. Dreadful panic sets in, the frozen sun goes down. Fear, uncertainty, loss; we live in the darkest of times. Our task is still to introduce a real state of emergency. Wash your hands. Wear a mask.

„Ich weiß,/ ihr berührt euch so selig, weil die Liebkosung
verhält,/ weil die Stelle nicht schwindet, die ihr, Zärtliche,/br
zudeckt; weil ihr darunter das reine/ Dauern verspürt“

[I know/ you touch so blissfully because the caress preserves,/ because the place you cover so tenderly/does not vanish; because underneath it/ you feel pure duration]

—Rilke

—Orion
04.02.2020

#3

IN SPRING, AN INTERRUPTION

KORA

I am grateful that Orion wrote—because when August and I spoke of destitution and revolt, I was frustrated that we used old concepts to describe a novel situation. I had hoped the crisis signaled our world had really broken with its past. If that were true, we should have been able to leave our old models of thinking behind. As both our own theoretical impulses and the projections of the Imperial College make clear, we have not. The question is still the extent to which we can.

Orion is correct to say that there is nothing “analogous” between the virus and a revolt. The idea is obviously silly. Nevertheless, the crisis and revolt have in common something imaginary—which is not at all to say unreal—namely, the dream we have shared for centuries of a world entirely out of control. That dream has in a limited and terrible sense been fulfilled. The vertigo of the first days, in which the evictions were suspended and the economy upended and the offices and universities closed, had me terrified and then relieved. The virus has taught us well that the future is decidedly beyond human control.

Yet we continue to talk of power in the terms of “us” versus “them.” “Destitution, Interrupted” worried that while revolt returns power to

people on earth, the suspension that accompanied the coronavirus has rendered us without power. “*Interruption, Suspended*” worried that the virus demonstrates the same limit that we named two years ago—that we will not manage to make a break from the democratic party. It proposed that in this suspension, we institute our own ban. Are these not outdated concerns? The coronavirus demonstrates the futility of any one power asserting and maintaining social control. Again, the virus put everyone, rulers and ruled alike, into a position of reaction. Questions of power remain partially worthwhile, but the concern with “our autonomy” is a concern of the past.

Further, some of the institutions that have previously worried us no longer deserve our concern. The power that shapes our lives today lies not with national political parties but with science, or in, for instance, the ubiquity of computer screens and Amazon, and only secondarily with human actors. We must not take lightly the fact that some of the institutions we previously took to be fundamental to this world—like eviction, the economy, employment, and imprisonment for misdemeanors—are those that have been suspended.

On a different but related note: If we must go on chattering about destitution—and the concept is just common enough now for me to use it—Orion is correct to name an ambiguity in understandings of the term. But the tension is not precisely, as he frames it, between destitution understood as a dynamic intrinsic to constituted power and destitution understood as a political strategy to be accomplished. Rather, the conceptual tension lies between destitution understood as the exhibition of the arbitrariness of power and the somehow related and subsequent question of whether that exhibition restores a capacity to act. If “to destitute” means to undermine an apparatus that previously shaped us, then every “destitution” restores an ideal (real but not actual) and subjectless capacity to act. The question that follows is how such a restored capacity to act will be used or deployed—that is, the question of what is to be done, or more precisely, the question of what will be done.

I propose that we abandon the outdated desire for autonomy. I propose that we grapple with the blurring of any neat distinction between rulers and ruled. We should not assume the battle lines of our past remain the same in our present: the world is darker and

different, and we will find new friends just as we see the emergence of more determined enemies. And if these proposals seem to flirt with nihilism, let me be clear: I write none of this to eliminate the possibility of meaningful action. We live in an unprecedented mass demobilization. The fundamental arbitrariness of this world has been revealed. (Some rightly call this arbitrariness the *an-archē* of power. If destitution means the exhibition of the anarchic void at the heart of systems of control, then it has been done.) Politically, the way forward is simple. We should aim to forget the way things once were: organize and act to forget. In April, we cannot pay rent. In May or next year, we cannot resume work.

We live a dark battle between possible futures and irreconcilable pasts. The world is changing decisively, in painful demobilization and confusing slowness rather than a grand and joyous event. In the meantime, I hope the reigning uncertainty does not stop us from inhabiting our present—in what I can only hope will be an unprecedented and terrible bliss. If that sounds cold, it is only because our world is.

—Kora
Atlanta, April 4, 2020

#4

EVERYTHING IS TRUE, NOTHING IS PERMITTED

ICARUS

“They’ve already destroyed everything, all the structures we believed in, trusted. Maybe we’re in a transitional phase, you know? There’s some sort of substitution going on. Meanwhile, we’re navigating in a tremendous vacuum, vaguely oriented by the stars but with no true reference point. Our compasses have gone wild, spinning madly, attracted by thousands of magnetic poles. We might as well throw them out the window, they’re obsolete. It’s just us and the night sky, like it was for the early explorers, while we wait for new, more advanced navigational devices to be invented. My only fear is that the stars have somehow gotten out of place and will be no help as references either.”

—Ignacio de Loyola Brando, *“And Still the Earth”*

Dear friends,

It can be strange to intervene in someone else’s debate, but I don’t believe you’ll hold it against me if I do. Over the past weeks, I’ve rather enjoyed the commentary and exchange of letters between my friends, August, Kora, and Orion. Something about the reflections of my friends is missing for me still, so I’ll chime in without wasting too much time, I hope.

Quarantine: Incomplete

What we think is happening is only somewhat accurate.

Today, millions of people are working. In warehouses, in offices, in fields, kitchens and storerooms; from the computer, the sorting room and at construction sites, millions of Americans are sharing the coronavirus with each other and with their neighbors. Many of them are asymptomatic, a portion are not sick yet, and certainly some of them are still hiding their symptoms from their families, employers, and coworkers. No zombie apocalypse is complete without the inconsiderate hot-head who insists, deceptively, that his injury is “nothing, it’s fine, let’s keep moving”. Orion wrote that the virus imposes “its own temporality, which immobilizes everything.” If only.

Logistics, shipping, freight, warehousing: these are some of the largest sectors of the 21st century workforce, and they are all on overtime. From Whole Foods to Old Dominion, these disposable workers are simultaneously killable—insofar as the market facilitates their endangerment via assured contact with the virus—and indispensable, insofar as they must not be allowed to strike, unionize, or cease working that this society may minimally function. In these industries, overwhelmingly, black men and immigrants are crammed into job sites without any protective equipment. In other words, they are proletarians in the classical sense, and they are still at work. A true quarantine, a dignified exodus from the commodity society and its extensive productive apparatus, would halt all forms of labor and toil, a circumstance as yet unrealized. If we can say we are living in a quarantine, we must say that it is still incomplete.

Autonomy or Automata?

The pandemic affects all of humanity—which no longer exists as such.

What we once called “society” (an entity which now insists it can survive unity and distance simultaneously, even distance for the sake of unity), has been replaced by billions of apparatuses. These apparatuses constitute a vast ACEPHALOGRAM—a system

of machines designed to trace and retrace the consciousness of a world that has definitively *lost its head*.

The period of real domination opened by the aggressive economic and political restructuring in the 70s, 80s, and 90s—“globalization”—has pushed a vast quantity of workers out of manufacturing and into service related industries. Services being overall less profitable than commodity manufacturing and heavy industry, other technological implements such as we see emerge from Silicon Valley have filled the gap, so to speak, of lost profits for the economy by allowing large advertising and analysis firms to mine directly the collective human ambitions in art, sex, politics, culture, and society. To open up this mine, which has produced an existential ruin comparable to the environmental ruin associated with mineral mining, the internet has developed as a global network of pseudo participatory information systems. The data thirst of these industries cannot be sated by the administration of facts from the center or top, they must be produced by the masses directly. But technology does not simply catch data falling naturally from the sky or running off the gutters of consciousness. It produces data by arranging relations such that they produce content that can be bought and sold. Under such conditions, the medical, political, technological and ontological crisis of a pandemic cannot help but be experienced as a video, a collection of tweets, graphs, memes, as background noise, as a conspiracy theory, as a genre in the endless relay of notifications.

The Middle of the Beginning of the End

What makes individual interpretation possible, makes common understanding impossible.

The truth is that social media has allowed billions of people to coordinate themselves into large and small containers of meaning and virtual energy. These containers, ecosystems of signs and signifiers, by dint of their polycentralized arrangement, function as an epistemological subversion of established truth-making infrastructures that require a certain amount of hegemony or global purchase: the scientific method, fact-checking, and debate.

Occasionally, the understanding produced in these containers, theory-fictions more than anything else, incidentally conform to an intensity with physical correlatives capable of overpowering police infrastructures and seizing public space, as we saw across the world in 2019. More often, the echo chambers, as they are often called, curtail feelings of common dialogue and the perception of shared futurity that would be seemingly embedded in such a “global” sharing of information. This curtailing allows people of all “types” to be bundled together as data sets, insulated from the experience of true diversity of thought, of experience, of analysis. The polycentralized arrangement of the internet today may be even less participatory than previous eras of information sharing, even though it doesn’t feel that way.

Commentators and critics have used the ongoing crisis to delay the moment of our collective education with unwavering ideological entrenchment. At work, it is not uncommon for me to hear small business owners and day traders talk about the failures of socialized medicine in Italy, implicitly endorsing greater privatization in the US. Among activists, liberals, and leftists, it is impossible to imagine a greater indictment on the privatized, decentralized, healthcare system than what is taking place. Apocalyptic Christian sects believe the government is going to repress churches for gathering, and social justice advocates believe the coronavirus crisis will be “the same, but worse” on every oppressive axis. It’s hard to imagine another reflex.

While they recognize that the internet has plunged billions of people into a pulverized simulacrum, some of my comrades would have us devote ourselves to the dissemination of real news, of verified and sober analysis, of scientific rigor, in order to combat the prevailing disarray. This warms my heart just as it saddens my intellect. We have always been machine-breakers, in a way, revolting against the forward and crushing movement of industry to preserve a less alienated experience of reality, labor, and community. We aren’t wrong for that. We should be reliable sources of information, but not because we will convince people with our reports—which may no longer be so possible online—rather because we believe it is the right thing to do, and because we can at least proceed on a clear and shared basis with each other. But what other strategies

could we utilize for analyzing the world that would allow us to act within the protracted vertigo, without trapping ourselves or others in ideological camps, and without losing revolutionary aspirations in a world where global verification of facts seems impossible, but where universal need for a transformation, fascistic or revolutionary, feels like common sense?

Everything Is True, Nothing Is Permitted

The system reduces itself to a pure flux of dynamics.

“We dreamed of utopia and woke up screaming
A poor lonely cowboy that comes back home, what a wonder”
—Roberto Bolano, “Leave Everything, Again

For millennia, the administration of public facts was the cornerstone of political power, and stamping out alternative readings the chief objective of the repressive machinery. The ruling bureaucracy has organized itself to prevent any global loss of control. They've always done that. What is surprising is how readily, since 9/11 at least, perhaps much earlier, they have abandoned many important methods for doing so. As the possibility of imagining its own future became increasingly stamped-out, the reigning order abandoned any pretense of pursuing the ideals it propped itself up on, its sole promise being to ward-off unforeseen eventualities. Without embarrassing myself with long-winded arguments about things I am ill-equipped to discuss—certainly less knowledgeable than my dear friends are on such matters as philosophy and critical works—I'd prefer to refer to an argument advanced by Brian Massumi in his essay “National Emergency Enterprise”. In this piece, he argues that a primary strategy of governance is to identify all possible causes of a scenario. The market refashions environments that submit the living tissue of relations one and all to technological “dataveillance”, information which, in principle, allows the administrators of such a system to model its every possible outcome, translating every action into a trans-action, while ensuring that every aberration meets a form of control. He utilizes the example of a forest fire, but we can just look at the pandemic and its consequences.

The ruling class everywhere, has argued and governed as if the coronavirus is “merely the flu,” justifying late responses and insufficient care, while also closing borders and taking emergency measures as if we are living in a veritable plague. There are strategies attached to every discourse, interests silently advanced with each interpretation, and powers produced and mobilized by every kind of theory and operation. Anyway, we have been living in the fall out of multiple convergent strategies for controlling and responding to this situation. The governors of the world, at least of the democratic countries, are basically throwing things against a wall and seeing what sticks. We can imagine that modeling and predictions are conducted endlessly based on analytics produced through data mining and network analysis purchased from Google, Facebook, Twitter, and elsewhere. As technocratic governments subordinate welfare states to the “science” of neoliberalism, the nihilism of the powerful today subordinates everything to the “science” of control.

Anyway, who organizes oblivion today acts with no principles and can only speak in lies. What does this mean for the rest of us?

Nothing Is Everything, True Is Permitted

Truth does not require a subject, only lies do. Let's keep it real, whatever that is.

We can and are responding to this situation. The most important thing, from my perspective, is that we develop a vibrant enough ecosystem of strategies, corresponding to the largest possible interpretation of facts, without dividing our sympathies and concerns into rival fiefdoms and ideological sects. There are benefits to arguing that nothing of the situation is unique, that in fact the worst off before are the worst off now, that today simply represents an opportunity for us, etc. I am not among the comrades advancing this position, but I want to see the results of that framework as soon as possible, if it does not in fact raise the threshold for meaningful interventions. There are benefits to arguing that the quarantine is not deep enough, that the politics of mobilization have failed utterly to devastate the economy, but that a true lock down of the world could resemble the worlds first ever international wildcat

general strike. I want to hear advocates of this position contend with the possibility of carceral interpretations of this argument. For those planting survival gardens, for those running autonomous rent strike hotlines, for those training in firearms, I want us to develop a shared enough perspective to see that there is a simple unity in our strategies, which is what is precisely, and incorrectly, attacked in Kora's most recent letter to Orion: our autonomy. Beyond any individualistic misinterpretations, it is my perspective that the ability of human beings to self-authorize our activity, to determine our shared destinies, to control supply chains, vital infrastructures, and means of subsistence without the mediating factors of the market, are necessary prerequisites for a dignified life on earth. This is not to say, as Kora has intelligently argued, that anyone could come to control the unfolding course of history—a delusion that preppers, governors, and revolutionaries have all held—but precisely that autonomous, self-organized, structures are the only structures capable of responding quickly enough to the destabilizing, frightening, and uncertain futures lying in wait regardless of what we or anyone else do. We must utilize the current situation to repolarize the circumstances to the best of our ability around foundational concerns of power: on the one hand, there are all of the people of the world, some of them bastards we would not live with, and our shared need for dignified healthcare, housing, sustenance, and livelihood; and on the other hand there are all of the bastards waiting this out on yachts, manipulating public data for the sake of a geopolitical PR battle, utilizing the pandemic to pursue totalitarian power fantasies and clampdowns. We don't need to steer the ship forward, we need to be able to swim in the wreckage.

Sorry, I wrote too much. Thanks for reading and I look forward to reading what others think soon.

—Icarus

04.11.2020

STATE OF EMERGENCY, DAY 40
UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

#5

UNRECONCILED

RON SAKOLSKY

“Stop blaming me, accusing me, stalking me. Working yourselves into an anti-viral paralysis. All of that is childish. Let me propose a different perspective. See me as your savior instead of your gravedigger. You’re free not to believe me, but I have come to shut down the machine whose emergency brake you couldn’t find. I have come in order to suspend the operation that held you hostage. *I have come in order to demonstrate the aberration that normality constitutes.* Ask yourselves how you could find it so comfortable to let yourselves be governed. Don’t let those who’ve led you to the abyss claim to be saving you from it: they will prepare for you a more perfect hell, an even deeper grave. Thanks to me for an indefinite time you will no longer work, your kids won’t go to school, and yet it will be the opposite of a vacation. Vacations are the space that must be filled up at all costs while waiting for the obligatory return to work. I render you *idle*. Use the time I’m giving you to envision the world of the aftermath in light of what you’ve learned from the collapse that’s underway. The disaster ends when the economy ends. The economy *is* the devastation.”

—*What the Virus Said*

Just when I was feeling most elated about prospects for the future given the strength of the Indigenous resistance sweeping Canada in early 2020, the coronavirus arrived on the scene with whiplash-inducing force to upstage everything in its deadly path

unexpectedly shutting down whatever parts of the Canadian economy had not already been intentionally shut down by the Wet'suwet'en land defenders and those involved in solidarity actions that had immediately preceded the spread of the disease. Rather than framing The Virus exclusively within the kind of nightmare scenario that is typically associated with the mainstreaming of the term "surreal" (as if all there ever is to surrealism's critique of reality is this dark side), I want to instead illuminate the surreal possibilities for social transformation that can be revealed by creating a surreal (rather than literal) analogy between the contagion of the virus and the contagion of revolt.

Starting in February of this year the appearance of a widespread Indigenous uprising on the stage of Canadian history swiftly moved the realm of the surreal from dreams of radical transformation to the direct action undertaken to bring it about. Railways, highways and ferries were blockaded, provincial legislatures, government administrative offices, banks and corporate headquarters were occupied. For many inconvenienced Canadians, such actions as these were considered to be unacceptable even though they would prove to be only a fraction as disruptive as the more authoritarian forms of state control that would later shelter under the legitimacy of saving us from The Virus.

Though the immediacy of the COVID-19 pandemic would quickly overshadow the earlier Indigenous revolt in the public eye, it is now evident to many that the smiley-faced mask of Canadian colonialism has been pulled off to reveal a state that in spite of its professed human rights and climate change awareness rhetoric continues to have no compunctions about invading Indigenous territory without consent to build pipelines for fracked natural gas and tar sands oil because of what it considers to be in the best interests of the almighty economy. As Tawinikay (aka Southern Wind Woman) has written, "If only one thing has brought me joy in the last few weeks, it began when the matriarchs at Unist'ot'en burned the Canadian flag and declared reconciliation dead. Like wildfire, it swept through the hearts of youth across the territories. Out of their mouths, with teeth bared, they echoed back: reconciliation is dead! reconciliation is dead! Reconciliation was a distraction, a way for them to dangle a carrot in front of us and trick

us into behaving. Do we not have a right to the land stolen from our ancestors? *It's time to shut everything the fuck down*".

Just as Indigenous peoples have demanded their land back in rural areas while pronouncing the false hope of government-brokered reconciliation to be dead, the systemic dislocations to the economy brought on by the coronavirus have led urban anarchists to address fundamental land issues by calling for rent strikes. But why stop there? In response to the devastation associated with The Virus, we have heard calls for the cessation of not only rent, but mortgage and utility payments, even the cancellation of debt itself, the end of wage slavery, and demands for the cessation of arrests for minor offenses, the release of prisoners who have committed non-violent crimes, or flat-out prison abolition. As surrealists we might ask ourselves what other noxious aspects of reality might be called into question and transformed by beginning to imagine what might exist in their place.

Where I live in British Columbia, resource extraction has always been the name of the game, but the emergence this year of a widespread oppositional network ranging from "land back" Indigenous warriors to elder traditionalists and from Extinction Rebellion activists to anarchist insurrectionaries has been heartening. Together, this multi-pronged force disrupted business as usual in solidarity with Unist'ot'en and Wet'suwet'en land defenders, and threatened to bring the Canadian economy to a grinding halt. This time growing numbers of Indigenous peoples were not willing to be bought off by corporate bribes or mollified by a legal system that has never done anything but pacify, brutalize, or betray them in the process of stealing their land. This time people fought back in droves against the forces of colonial law and order. This time the air was alive with a spirit of refusal and rebellion with one action building upon another in a burgeoning movement that could not be stopped. When one railroad blockade would be busted by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP), another would spring up in its place elsewhere extending the frontlines of the battle all across the continent.

As I write, the wheel of change is still in spin. What the final outcome will be in relation to either the COVID-19 virus or the virus of revolt is unknown, especially in relation to the predatory

nature of the times in which we live where the emphasis is often placed on the institution of statist forms of social control rather than grass roots mutual aid efforts in relation to the immanence of societal upheaval. Even though the pandemic has supposedly shut down the provincial economy with lightning speed, Coastal Gas Link's pipeline construction efforts with their invasive industrial "man-camps" have still been allowed to continue to exist on unceded Wet'suwet'en territory with RCMP logistical support, thereby callously endangering the health and safety of the Indigenous inhabitants. It's abundantly clear whose lives matter to the Canadian government and whose don't. Consequently, it will remain very hard for the authorities to put the genie of Indigenous rebellion back in the colonial bottle in the future. In the meantime, we are mourning what of value we've lost from the past, celebrating what we've created in the present, and still demanding the impossible.

—April 22nd, 2020

#6

EMPTY PLAZAS

EMILIO

Dear Friends,

I've been inspired by letters circulated recently by Ill Will Editions, which have offered a helpful window for thinking through the current global pandemic. Reading them, it struck me that several have circled around something like a disjunction or asymmetry between two distinct yet overlapping lines of thought: on one hand, there is the understandable fear that the forms of social control presently implemented will be sustained beyond the pandemic (not unlike they were after 9-11), a concern that directs our attention to state power; on the other hand, there is the disruptive force of the virus itself, like a non-human agency conducting itself across us, and operating beneath and beyond the waves of governmental and economic measures by means of which the elites in the political class scramble to maintain an increasingly tenuous veneer control and authority. Orion addressed the latter in his letter when he described the virus as a power that has "constructed its own temporality, which immobilizes everything," a power "capable of extending beyond what the insurrections proved incapable of doing, and actually shutting down the economy." Two types of agency, two asymmetrical lines of force—how are we to parse their peculiar overlap in this moment, those of us who have never been friends of their 'normal time'?

I write to you now from Chile, a place that has been in a state of unrest since October of last year. As it happens, the pandemic's arrival within the context of an unfolding insurrection provides a moment to reflect on the modalities of crisis politics and control in the current moment.

Our situation might appear quite the same as anywhere else these days: the Chilean government followed the example of governments around the globe, declaring a national emergency in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. In point of fact, this most recent state of exception is the third that the government has declared in the past decade, since it follows not only the uprising this past October, but also the catastrophic earthquake of 2010. In each of these cases, the maintenance of public order was handed over to the military, which did not hesitate to implement nightly curfews and military checkpoints restricting and surveying movement.

Have we shifted from one form of upheaval to another? If so, the relevant distinction would not be between normal and exceptional states, between the rule of law and emergency measures, but rather, in this shift, *who is in control over the territory, and how are we inhabiting it?* Under what conditions can this question no longer be answered? If it is possible to assess continuity and divergence in our present moment in Chile, one can do so only by looking at the experience of, and contestation over, collectively inhabited territory. I'd like to share with you a few examples of such experiences, through several portraits of everyday life that capture the myriad of ways people and institutions have responded to the COVID pandemic amidst contestations over territory.

Variable Enforcement

On March 15th, 2019, in a televised, national press conference, the Chilean Board of Medicine (*colegio de médicos*) criticized the current Ministry of Health for improperly implementing its protocols. Since the government was failing to control the outbreak that started in Santiago, they asked everyone in the city to begin a full 14-day quarantine: no work, no school, no leaving the house. Many in the city followed this quarantine—bars and nightclubs owners closed their businesses in the name of social responsibility, and mall employees staged walk-outs and went on strike until the city closed the shopping malls.

It wasn't until March 20th that the Chilean government finally implemented quarantine measures in Santiago, including full quarantine in territories with high rates of COVID-19, such as the rich neighborhoods of Santiago and the city's downtown. Those who live inside the quarantine zone must now fill out a form on the police department's website and download a "temporary pass" before leaving their house. On the form, we must select an option from the list of permitted reasons to travel from our homes, and declare where we are going. We can request a 4 hour pass 2 times a week for basic necessities, a 12-hour pass to go to a doctor's appointment, and a 30-minute pass to walk their dog. Essential workers can request a *salvoconducto*, a permit to travel during military curfew or cross military checkpoint. At the beginning of the quarantine, police stations had lines around the block, with people waiting to apply for a *salvoconducto*.

Along the border of Santiago's quarantine zones, only a dozen or so military checkpoints exist. We quickly realized we could walk past the handful of guards stationed there. Furthermore, city buses appear to be affected by these quarantine measures. In effect, those who opt to remain at home in the quarantine zone often do so because they are complying with the medical board's recommendation, rather than the official quarantine measures.

Meanwhile, the official quarantine measures have not been extended to the combative *poblaciones*, home to the greatest number of participants in the October 2019 Chilean uprising. These neighborhoods at the periphery of the city were formed by massive squatter movements in the 1950s and 60s, when residents collaborated to build houses, defend each other from eviction, and negotiate with the government for city infrastructure, schools, and clinics. If you've seen videos of riots during the March 29th Day of Combative Youth (*Dia del Joven Combatiente*), the footage is more than likely from these neighborhoods.

Back in October, the rebellious tendencies of the *poblaciones* were no longer confined to those specific areas but proliferated all over, as people circulated in the downtown, metro, supermarkets, pharmacies, and shopping malls. The attacks weren't against the police and metro—the two obvious symbols of state power—but also targeted the formal economy itself.

This year, despite the military curfews and fear of the pandemic, the *poblaciones* celebrated the day of combative youth by taking the streets and confronting the police. Unlike in central Santiago, public space continues to be open in the *poblaciones*. Although there are fewer protests and social life has diminished, the pandemic has not yet fully interrupted life in these areas. Initially, protestors who congregated in Plaza de la Dignidad feared that the government would use its official quarantine measures as an attempt to regain social control after months of Chile's social uprising. In the end, no heavy effort was made to enforce quarantine measures in those spaces where they would anyway be contested: the boundaries of the quarantine zones and the rebellious territories of the *poblaciones*.

Control of Public Space

With the new norms of quarantine and social distance, the pandemic has interrupted the shared experiences of protests in the streets and neighborhood events in the plazas. Since October, upheaval has structured our everyday life where we live, rendering our neighborhood projects both possible and necessary. Neighbors formed assemblies in response to the upheaval of the massive street demonstrations. Through assemblies, we hoped to meet each other, and sustain the forces in the streets and life in the neighborhood. People used assemblies to organize and publicize new neighborhood events such as community kitchens, flea markets, children's theater, and open-air concerts. Meeting in parks, our assemblies would be constantly interrupted by the life of the neighborhood: street dogs greeting us and playing in the middle of the circle, people asking for cigarettes, sitting with us and ranting, and old insurgents saying we should stop talking and start lighting barricades.

The pandemic has radically interrupted this everyday life. Now, the neighborhood assembly is online. Assemblies, mutual aid, and online workshops are coordinated and announced in their corresponding Whatsapp groups. Uninvited neighbors can no longer drop in spontaneously. My capacity to write in a café was enabled by the possibility that I would be interrupted by an old friend walking in with someone new to meet, or that protesters would spill into the café from Plaza Dignidad to evade the spray of the *guanaco* (the police's water cannon tank), interruptions that conferred sense of

structure and situated meaning on my work. Could it be that all activity becomes meaningful only when conducted in the public? In any case, we were wrong to have ever looked upon the possibility of interruption as a nuisance or distraction. In fact, the more entangled they were with the lives of others who inhabit our world, the more meaningful our activities became. The quarantine signifies the interruption of this shared sensibility and with it, made all the other interruptions that followed from it impossible as well.

Who Imposes Restriction of Movement?

And yet, things are still happening in Chile: in other regions, residents have continued participating in the uprising by blockading the industries that destroy their territories. In Patagonia, for instance, several towns have been engaged in a decades-long conflict with the players in the salmon industry. By dumping antibiotics, feed, and waste, salmon farms have decimated the waterways on which local fishermen rely, while industrial freight trucks ravage the narrow country roads that connect towns to one another.

When things kicked off back in October, the breadth and depth of the upheaval became apparent to us only after learning that, while Santiago was burning, rural communities were also erecting barricades on country roads and interrupting Chile's major industries. These same towns blockaded the roads that brought workers and supplies to the Salmon farms. In those days, to get a reading of the situation within one's city, it sufficed to walk down the street, and yet it was comparatively difficult to gather news of the protests elsewhere in the country. Despite this difficulty, "Free Chiloe" (*Chiloe Libre*) graffiti proliferated on buildings throughout Santiago.

When the COVID outbreak began to spread outside Santiago, residents on the Patagonian island of Chiloe blocked ferries carrying salmon industry workers. Eventually, the government restricted transportation to the Island to prevent the spread of Coronavirus; yet, when a ferry arrived bringing additional police forces to enforce the quarantine, Chiloe residents attempted to block that ferry, too.

A Determinate Ambiguity

In his recent reflection on Agamben and the legacy of the Chilean state of exception, Gerard Munoz offers some insight into why the

state's emergency measures ultimately failed to take any effective hold during the October uprising:

The Chilean debate is in a better position to arrive at a mature understanding of the state of exception, not as an abstract formula, but as something latent within democracies. The dispensation of Western politics into security and exceptionality is not a conceptual horizon of what politics could be; it is what the ontology of the political represents once the internal limits of liberal principles crumble to pieces (and with it, any separation between consumers and citizens, state and market, jurisprudence and real subsumption).

In order to function, the deployment of a state of emergency relies on the liberal distinction between market and state, citizen and delinquent. The Chilean government appealed to the “security of the state”, but the uprising had already disproven the liberal principles of the post dictatorship Chile, and to such an extent that a reversal of course had for a time become strictly *unthinkable*.

In the months following the social explosion, we could not have conceived any event that could bring any swift conclusion to the life of the streets. There was no amount of heavy-handed police repression that could have convinced us of a self-evident need for law and order; no over-hyped constitutional assembly or impending financial crisis could convince us that there was a real, external force that would interrupt the social explosion.

And yet, here we are: the pandemic has brought an abrupt halt to the uprising in ways we had thought to be impossible. From the first week of the COVID outbreak, Plaza de la Dignidad has been quiet. There has been no lootings, even despite the lack of supplies. Conflicts with the police remain confined to the *poblaciones*.

To what does it owe this power? The pandemic interrupted the uprising because to many, it appeared as an *external* force. If it possesses a power that no governmental ordinance can rival, this is because its presence tends to shatter the various separations on which the administration of this world depends because it doesn't recognize the gap between state and market, consumer and citizen, jurisprudence and subsumption. As a result, we no longer know if we are taking care of ourselves in *resistance* to the state, *despite* the state, or in *subordination* to the state. As the pandemic moves through this world, it interrupts the positive contact with which this world

is based. In the absence of such contact, we are left with scrambled claims of obedience and contestation, resistance and self-assertion.

This is not the place to recall the extent to which the fictive ideals of liberal democracy depended on the growth of a fracture between interior and exterior realms of experience: public reason and private obedience, faith and confession, moral conscience and political right, etc. Where once there appeared a world, full and filthy with attachments, heresies, and allegiances, only a subject—a self-possessed and autonomous citizen—would be left to remain. Was this not the project of modern economic governance?

Not only has the experience of space been re-liberalizing, but also the forms of care have followed suit. As the insurrection recedes, and with it, the bustling and rich horizon of shared attention and concern, the forms of care that now replace it already bear the stain within them of that *absence to the world* that defined the modern liberal subject. While we, like everyone with a conscience, are moved to care for others more vulnerable than us in this moment, we must not confuse the notions of care wrapped up within practices social distancing with the practices we developed together before the pandemic, and which are only possible by fully inhabiting a shared territory. We are told this crisis threatens the vulnerable, the infirm, the elderly; that, in taking care of ourselves, we are taking care of others; that our role, as participants in a ‘shared world’, is to reduce the spread through social distancing and isolation. Yet, to be deprived of social life and the use of public space, is to be deprived of those very experiences that confer meaning on concepts such as care, support, and community action. After all, to experience a common world is to participate in the activities that make it not merely possible, but real; only through combination and encounter can our singular capacities reveal to us all that outstrips them, all that can only belong to *anyone*, to everyone. In quarantine, we risk being denied the conditions that make possible an awareness that we inhabit a shared world.

—Emilio, Santiago de Chile
April 24th, 2020

#7

A STEP FORWARD?

ZILARRA

“I felt weightless. I felt nothing would happen to me. I felt that anything might happen to me. I was looking straight ahead, running, trying to keep up, and things were occurring along the dark peripheries of my vision: there would be a bright light and then darkness again and the sound, constantly, of something else breaking, and of movement, of objects being thrown and of people falling.”

—Bill Buford, *Among the Thugs*

Dear friends,

I've found the arrival of your letters to be uplifting and they bring with them much to ponder in the current situation. Hopefully this letter can do the same for others.

We find ourselves in a peculiar split in our perception of time. On the one hand, the days are slow and bleed into each other in such a way that it seems that what Kora said in her letter has come true—a terrible bliss. On the other hand, what is relevant in how to respond to the crisis changes so rapidly that if we dare turn away from our phones and the struggle for even a short while, we will find nothing is any longer what it was, as if we had stepped into a slow moving, nearly frozen time space.

While many of us find ourselves unable to participate in struggles in the ways we are used to, the rent strike as a form of refusal has been working nicely. For a second it seemed that we had found a worthwhile line of attack, one capable of grabbing hold of the imagination. With any luck we will continue to see the strike spread.

We also were in the early days of experimenting with slow rolls, causing traffic jams outside of prisons and jails. A place where the virus finds itself able to attack so effectively those who make up the surplus population. A population that so many regard as no more human than the virus.

It seems that for the time being, in the eyes of the media and those who consume their images that the slow rolls have been popularized by the political right—a death cult willing to tolerate a steepening of the death toll to enable economic remobilization.

We can respond to this situation in a few ways. One of them is to form a tenuous alliance with the emerging energy, embracing the figure of revolt against the state, if nothing else. As a reflex, this makes sense. When we see the beginnings of social movement activity, we have often rushed to join the action. In this case, I think that would be a mistake.

We have done our best over the years to make a break from the left. While it's true that we do from time to time have the misfortune of finding ourselves in common struggle with them, the left no longer recognizes us, and our relation to them is that of a strategist to her enemy, certainly not that of old friends. This is even more true than in these shared struggles, since any degree of efficacy we achieve invariably tends to place us in direct conflict with the Leftists. Kora was right in her letter to highlight our desire to escape the Democratic Party. Well, now is a time where we can truly become ungovernable; with the economy on the line, the Democrats wouldn't dare try to associate and then neutralize us. The Democrats are tied to the neoliberal project and this necessitates the continuation of the economy. With over 25 million on unemployment, any concentrated effort to disrupt the economy (be it slow rolls, general strikes, etc.) is anathema to the Democrats. The goal of suppressing the economy is one goal that they could not coopt.

We've also done a fine job of not working with the political right much at all (and have more often found ourselves their direct antag-

onists). I don't think now is the time to make an unholy alliance with a right wing that is deadset on forcing us back to work. Work is already a site of misery under the best of conditions, but the death it threatens us with has recently become even more acutely imminent. I do not say this out of any sort of blood feud (and anyway, those sectors of the right against which we have found ourselves squaring off are fairly marginalized in this current upswing). As comrades have pointed out elsewhere, there are times where we must struggle in a mixed and muddled space that includes the Right. In such cases, as our comrades pointed out, the strategies we must deploy to sideline conservatives are unlike those we typically use against leftists when we find ourselves in a shared struggle with them. But this approach is not what we should do in this case. While the right wing "reopener" demonstrations may appear as the anti-state actors in the moment, with their sneers and shouts directed at state governors, they are not the Party of Anarchy for which we remain on the lookout. They desire a return to normalcy, a false normalcy that would only see us back to work, with the virus spreading at an even faster rate than it already is.

Perhaps I am wrong. As Icarus asked in his letter, I want to see the different positions and proposals explained and laid out for us. We are all searching for the correct moves, and when we have inklings towards or against a move, it would do us well to show others the way forward, or where not to venture.

In that spirit I will briefly offer some ideas on what may help us going forward. The alliances we must form now are with those ready to fight, but who do not have the ideological baggage of the left or the right. Their energies are the ones we should be attaching ourselves to.

Buford's descent into the English soccer hooligan subculture in *Among the Thugs* offers an instructive case study. At one point, he recounts a scene in which the fascist British National Party attempted to forge bonds with the hooligans by means of a violent episode, in the hopes of co-opting them as the BNP's street fighters. We need not coopt anyone. Our task, instead, involves the generation of alliances that lead to activation. Co-opting would require us to be in a dialogue aimed at orienting others to our views, whereas an alliance respects their ways as their own. Who can we forge alliances with, and then activate

those alliances that will lead to the most chaotic, desirable, and economy-shattering result?

We've already recognized renters refusing to pay, and prisoners refusing to stay put in warehouses and watch as they become death camps. These are alliances worth exploring. But what of the sideshows that still outmaneuver the pigs, and socially distance while drifting? Or the dirt bike and ATV crews who make the cities their playgrounds? Or the "Essential Workers" who commit sabotage, and organize wildcat strikes? Or for that matter, all those who keep their distance from social media, but who would be only too happy to join a slow roll for life when the time comes? These are the people we need to be finding.

Even in uncanny times, old tasks still ring true. We would do well to stay the course:

1. Find each other
2. Block everything
3. Become Ungovernable

With love and nervous anticipation,

—Zilarra
April 25, 2020

#8

SHARDS

NEVADA

In March, my friends August and Kora spoke of a “jump-cut” when describing the interruption that COVID-19 has had on many of our lives.¹ I too felt this sense of disorientation in the first days and weeks of the pandemic, as the virus made its way first through my social media feed, before seeping into casual conversations and suddenly coming to structure our daily lives. The “inhuman velocity” of change made it impossible to grasp. Yet while the pace of events was indeed disorienting, it also seemed to present a window for previously radical ideas to take hold in ways we could have never imagined.

It was not long before such hopes found collective expression. Calls for a rent strike invaded the public imagination, and neighbors who had barely spoken before started getting organized together. Mutual aid became a common expression to describe the outpouring of caring gestures that so many sought to share with one another as people were alternatively laid off or forced to work hazardous conditions, as schools closed, social spaces were shuttered, and venturing to the store became a daunting task. In such rebellious commitments to one another, we see glimmers of our true potential.

1. August and Kora, “Destitution, Interrupted.”

From my vantage point, it seems nonetheless likely that the window of opportunity has by now closed. Despite his pessimistic tone, Frédéric Neyrat was not wrong to say that “today there is no communism sufficiently powerful enough to be in a position to welcome an opportunity such as the one that confronts us today.”² A new routine of quarantine has imposed itself—if not yet a “new normal”, a *temporary* normality has restructured the rhythm of daily life. Whatever chance there might have been to convert COVID-19 into the death blow of capitalism, if it is even possible for a single crisis to accomplish such a thing, this chance seems for now to have passed us by.

While it is still important to intervene in these windows as they open—and rest assured, the bumbling politicians attempting a hasty return to a normality that no longer exists will ensure there will indeed be more windows of opportunity to come—it is not sufficient to only respond to crises as they arise. Is there another rhythm, another sense of temporal possibility from which we might engage with the world, beyond the unceasing progression of political and social crises that keep us continually on the back foot, and too often close before we can even make sense of them?

Despite knowing that life on earth is bigger, older, and ultimately more resilient than the overwhelming death drive of global capital, it’s hard to avoid a fatalistic sense of capitalist realism. A couple of months ago I expected my hopes for somehow escaping this system through a deepened bond with my local ecology to result in little more than a few additional carrots in my garden, or an ability to identify the trees near my house while the ecological collapse progressed alongside my draining, daily grind.

Some friends in Quebec recently proposed that we think of our ethical orientation toward the world in terms of an “ecology of presence”, which they understand as entailing a two-fold shift in our way of experiencing the world:

“An ecology of presence unfolds in a double movement, that of a material and existential unification of the world we inhabit. Positions and dispositions. To become present is a practice

2. Frédéric Neyrat, “Our Shared Absence.”

which consists of breaking with our absence from the world through an elaboration of new sensibilities, but also new positions from which to act on them, from new circumstances.”³

Like many of you, I live in the city. A fair amount of my time is spent in buildings designed to look and feel the same on the inside during the cold Northern winters as if they’d been built in the desert. I can buy whatever I want at the grocery store any time of year. All of my would-be points of connection to the ecology around me are replaced by nodes in capitalism’s globalized logistical web. My roommate jokes about the street being the “big hallway” between indoor destinations, climate control not yet installed. I laugh, knowing something’s missing but unsure of exactly what. I can sense that things are moving in the wrong direction, but I’m not sure of exactly where to.

However, since the pandemic closed my workplace, I’ve had a lot more time to attend to the robins in my yard, and the plants that appear daily in the wild patches of my neighborhood. I’m glad to have been attuned to them this spring, a time of incredible growth and change, just as an unprecedented economic halt occurred. As the markets crashed, the plants surged forth into life. As everything stopped, I began to catch glimpses of life existing outside of the economy. The robin’s indifference to the world of the economy crept into clearer relief. The trees budding out, the increasingly energetic morning bird chorus, sightings of foxes and turkeys roaming the streets, and, of course, so many people in the mix. On what used to be a fairly quiet path by the river, I now run into people climbing trees, smoking joints, and chatting through masks. Back at home, my roommates and I, generally distant in our routines, began eating dinners together every night. There seem to be so many people baking bread, gardening, entertaining one another; decommodifying our lives—first out of necessity, but increasingly out of a desire for something better.

Life blossoms when the managers despair, and, for me, the way out has become much more clear.

For the moment, it seems undeniable that the jump-cut has produced sufficient chaos to “make order more desirable than revolution.”⁴

3. Dispositions, “Rattachements” (translation our own).

4. The Invisible Committee, “To Our Friends.”

This unfortunate fact is plainly seen in the resonance that the “Re-Open America” protests appear to have, irrespective of their obviously astroturfed nature.

I would be lying if I did not admit that there are moments when even I found myself wishing for a return to normal. Stability is seductive in a world that is falling apart before our eyes. To me, this means: How do we produce a stability that makes normality the least attractive option?

The ethical problem consists in unburdening ourselves of the urgency that transforms every episodic crisis into a frantic vocation, a desperate delegation that sees every suspension of normality as the ‘final one’. If we wish to avoid the exhaustion and disappointment to which such boom-and-bust cycles condemn us, we must attempt to orient ourselves along a longer-term temporality, one that affords us the means to cultivate a *desirable* stability, for ourselves and everyone else.

The sense of time we must cultivate persists and subsists under and alongside the waves of crises and emergencies. It allows us to approach them, not expecting a checkmate, but simply as a means to rearrange the board in a favorable way.

There are countless ways in which people are reclaiming the means to directly provide and care for each other as well as themselves. The mutual aid projects that have picked up such momentum in the past months are an early indication of the sorts of practices that will be necessary on a much wider scale in the coming months and years. Ultimately, the full breadth of this task is nothing less than to build a life in common outside of the economy. This is not a single act but an ongoing and lifelong process of inhabiting a world. In doing so we elaborate a different way of relating to ourselves, our surroundings, and each other in a way that blends these distinctions irreducibly.

Needless to say, there’s no secret escape hatch out of capitalism—our struggle is a long one. Still, glimmers of another life appear in shared experiences, in moments of temporary departure. As we build autonomy, we can glimpse other worlds in these moments, worlds within this one but not of it. When the pandemic hit, shards of these other worlds that’d I’d begun noticing suddenly came together to reflect a broader constellation of possibility. Just as much, I saw new forms of life emerge among

the people in my community, from the mutual aid projects to the kids playing in the park.

An interest in building a relationship with the land—which on Turtle Island must involve relationships with our indigenous friends and contributions to their struggles—ultimately reveals a multitude of worlds already existing, persisting, with room for us to fit in among them. While no one crisis could ever suspend them all, the time that weaves them together is also deeper and more enduring than our impoverished measurements could ever calculate. The robins in my yard, the trees, the river, are doing what they always have done, and we can meet them, here, in this place.⁵

—Nevada
May 5, 2020

5. I'm borrowing this phrasing from the title of Leanne Betasamosake Simpson's book *As We Always Have Done*, used here with a different context and meaning.

#9

THE DAY AFTER IS BEHIND US

JOËL GAYRAUD¹

I.

Everyone talks about ‘the day after.’ In today’s confined imagination, it has taken the long-vacant place of the dawn of the revolution or singing tomorrows. But the day after is already far behind us. The day after is the day that, from one country to another, followed the announcement of confinement. It was a day too much, the one that should never have come.

II.

On that day, the historical horizon, which a year of social crises had begun to reopen, was not simply closed. It was abruptly locked, without a shot being fired or a coup proclaimed. Never before has such a mass of people—more than half the world’s population—been placed under house arrest in such a short period of time.

1. We received the following article From Joël Gayraud as a contribution to our Quarantine Letters series. It first appeared in French on *Lundi matin* on May 4th, 2020. Our thanks to the Leeds Surrealist Group for their translation.

III.

In a few hours we went from 'Everything is fine' to 'Nothing is fine anymore'. The casualness principle that has served the market economy so nicely to the point of transforming the planet into a huge cesspool has magically disappeared before the principle of responsibility. But, in truth, everyone has given in to blackmail for survival. And, thereby, everyone has become irresponsible for themselves. Henceforth, no more future, no possible escape. In the autistic world of the spectacle, the apparent victory of the responsibility principle means the real ruin of the principle of hope.

IV.

Democracy, which survives only in the corrupt ritual of elections, has been dealt the final blow, without any criticism or next to none. And with it, two of those freedoms that were once considered fundamental: the freedom to come and go without restriction or conditions, and the freedom to meet up with whomever we wish. What transpired thereby was our irreversible transformation from illusory political subjects into authentic biopolitical cattle. Those who believed themselves to be people, or even individuals, are henceforth nothing more than bodies. So, they will be numbered, recorded, monitored, tracked, traced for a long time. At the same time, the old politics have disappeared, replaced by the management of survival. We won't regret it.

V.

Let us be understood. No one can deny the reality of the danger, or the need to overcome the epidemic and save as many lives as possible. But the human community could very well have acted on its own, without having to place its salvation in the hands of the State. This is what the Zapatistas immediately did in Chiapas, when faced with the Mexican State's denials and manifest negligence.

VI.

It is the movement in commercial trade solely, not bats or pangolins, that has transmitted the virus. Whilst acknowledging that they are the reservoir, these noble animals are only the material cause of the epidemic, not its efficient cause. We know the reasons for the rapid

spread of the virus: innumerable air flights, almost always caused by futile pretexts like work or tourist consumption, this lugubrious inversion of the journey. And then the epidemic went its merry way in air-conditioned purgatories: warships or cruise ships, office blocks, retirement homes, even hospitals. And now, at the end of the chain, it affects the poor, who do not take the plane or go on a cruise, but languish in prison or vegetate in the suburbs, subject to all kinds of stressors, and who will of course pay the full price of the crisis. The pandemic is not a natural disaster: it is the result of social relations—the market economy, condemned for a long time and more than ever in need of abolishing.

VII.

The ‘day after’ has ushered in the first global dystopia in history. Until now, even if they aimed (like Nazi Germany) for universal domination, dystopias always saw their expansion limited, in space and then in time. The dystopia now being established is intended to last, all the more so since its first act consisted in brutally modifying the conditions of sensibility: physical distance atrophies the most sensual of all the senses, touch, and the almost total primacy of screens mutilates our perception of the three dimensions of space. It is to be feared that once the epidemic has been overcome, human behavior will be radically altered, and for a long time.

VIII.

Since the Second World War, Capitalism has changed paradigms: it has become cybernetic. That is to say, it has created multiple feedback loops that have enabled it to absorb economic and social crises. It alternates between the phases of an administered economy and a liberal economy, but within the same regulatory system. In solely criticizing neoliberalism, we very soon miss the target, Capitalism, in its two inseparable aspects: liberal in economic initiative, statist in supporting the economy. To restart the machine that had temporarily stopped, we found, in an instant, the billions that were needed. Those nostalgic for Keynesianism and the Thirty Glorious Years can’t return to them. They have forgotten that the State is the best guarantor of the system. With the triumph of cybernetic dystopia, here they are now serving it.

IX.

The house arrest imposed by confinement is only the first moment of a new Total Mobilization. We are immobilized to better mobilize us. Mobilization has already started with working from home, which enables saving on fixed capital, such as offices and communicating machines, and soon on variable capital, with the transformation of employees into self-entrepreneurs, where everyone will be paid according to their profitability. It will continue through the major planetary ecological issues, a vast playground for green neo-capitalism, and with the alibi of seeking ever-greater efficiency, that is to say ever-increasing profits for the optimal management of scarcity and disaster.

X.

Those who call for a return to normality understand that this won't happen and worry as much as they rub their hands. It must be said that, for them lately, normality has not been too pleasing: it was the Yellow Vests occupying the roundabouts and filling the streets, barricades in Chile, the Lebanese insurgents. Some imagine, now that the situation has turned in their favor, they will be able to control it in the long term. Yet they have ruled blind until now, showing to what degree they were incapable of foreseeing anything. They saw nothing coming, neither people's anger, nor the fatal vagaries of the economy. Besides, they never foresee anything, deprived as they are of any historical vision. For them too, the horizon is closed.

XI.

As for those who, in their naive reformist conscience, believe that, when normal conditions are restored, we can 'no longer carry on as before', they are greatly mistaken. Because there will be no normality restored. It will vanish in the soft haze of lost illusions. They will obviously do as 'before', since they will do worse than before.

XII.

These considerations only sketch a picture of the moment which contains us, grasped in its general tendencies, and are by no means the decryption of a concerted plan of the leaders. The dystopia being established is not the product of a plot hatched by some

secret government, but proceeds from a contingent moment of Capitalism's rationalization, which does not however preclude its constitutive irrationality. The multiple ways in which States have responded to the epidemic, improvised and matched to the means at hand, provide glaring proof of this. On the contrary, their differences, their lies, their inconsistencies, their manifest failings show the fragile foundations – on which the cybernetic dystopia that claims to govern all aspects of the use of our lives – is built. It is perhaps at the very moment it thinks itself all-powerful that it will be the most vulnerable. However, the desire for freedom, equality and justice must be broad and deep-rooted enough to unite our forces. If we do not reopen the utopian breach, we will live perpetually in the 'day after'.

—May 4, 2020

#10

IRREVERSIBLE

DAKOTA

Friends,

I began this letter weeks ago. Many letters have come out since I started, and I've been humbled by the thoughtfulness and intelligence with which so many comrades all over are trying to think this moment.

I.

No one is immune to the confusion and disorientation of our current moment. Still, in our case it's been at least a bit surprising. After all, we're no strangers to rupture and crisis: most of us intervened during Ferguson, Baltimore, Charlottesville, during hurricanes, at Standing Rock, and so on. In this sense, I agree with Orion when he states that "we can't say that we were completely unprepared for something like this." And yet, as he is also quick to remind us, the preparation in question lies more on the side of form than of content: if the events of our recent have a lesson to teach us, it is that we must cast off our stubborn tendency to rely on past models, we must *be water*.

II.

August and Kora began this series by proposing that “we are living through a halfway destitution”. Without any doubt, half-measures abound these days: an economy half shut down, half-hearted safety measures on the part of both the state and capital, while Indigenous people continue to account for half the COVID-19 deaths in New Mexico. At the same time, I notice quite a few of my comrades continue to relate to our situation through the prism of the “day after”: the pandemic is seen as a “suspension” of normalcy, an interlude, with the idea that what matters is to prepare ourselves for the moment when “historical time” is reintroduced—otherwise, the restoration of normalcy will occur on terms that only serve our enemies. This way of thinking identifies possibility with exceptional states or moments, ‘windows’ that open and close, a view echoed by Nevada who worries, in the first part of their letter, that “the window of opportunity has by now closed”. The pessimism of Nevada mirrors the optimism of August and Kora, in that both perspectives await some sort of return to a normality that quite possibly may no longer exist.

Not every lull or period of calm should be mistaken for the closing of an opening. After all, it might be objected, if the event of the virus is truly unprecedented, can we fully trust ourselves to recognize when its window has closed? What if it remains halfway open? Is it not the mark of novelty to place our existing measures and habits in crisis, to be unrecognizable? What if Joel Gayraud is right that “the dystopia now being established is intended to last”, that the end of the lockdowns will not bring a return to the world we knew? According to Gayraud, while the pandemic might be overcome, the recalibration of sensibility we’re undergoing may not be easily undone, and “human behaviour will be radically altered, and for a long time”. Perhaps the event has already taken place.

Here is my concern: if we believe that the ‘day after’ is still ahead of us, there is a risk that we fall into a disposition of waiting. We act, but only in a half-committed fashion, believing on some level that the ‘interruption’ will end. We act as if history somehow trailed off mid-sentence, and we’re all unconsciously waiting for the period, for some signal that it’s time once again to gather up the familiar tools and, basically, to pick up more or less where we left off in the uprisings of 2019.

Could it be that the reason we feel stuck is because we are still unable to accept that there is no returning to the world as it was? Is our waiting not the inverse yet symmetrical energy of our enemies in the ReOpen protests?

Nevada is right to remind us of the importance of cultivating our own sense of time, our own consistency. Let us stop pretending that the time in which we dwell now, the only time that is real, will pass away of its own accord. Our task is to make this world pass away, which requires we begin from the middle. Pandemic time is not of our making, but that doesn't keep us from making use of it.

The destabilization and revolts of 2019 have not ended, they've mutated. We must mutate with them. It is time for a new metric of opportunity, new methods of intervention. What new and experimental ways of living and fighting can be cultivated here and now, which can still bear fruit regardless of whether the lockdowns last three months or a year?

III.

The rise of the 'essential worker', while new to our era, is not entirely new to history. Unlike the copper mines of the West, the mines of Appalachia rapidly expanded after World War I. Coal miners had been deemed "essential workers" to run the War Machine, which granted them pay raises and an exemption from the draft. This fostered a sense of entitlement in the miners that no trade union could fulfill on its own, and which the latter could at best solidify and push to the fore. When the war was over, coal companies tried to roll back many of these gains, resulting in escalating clashes between miners and the forces of order that would eventually culminate in the Battle of Blair Mountain.

Today, the category of the 'essential' has begun to absorb various roles in the reproduction of daily life. While we must be wary of the pitfalls of idealizing any particular role in the economy, one lesson from the past is that the sense of entitlement, and even the sense of resentment towards the elites that this might soon engender in millions of people could be explosive. What new bonds would need to be forged between doctors, janitors, grocery store clerks, and nurses in order to concentrate and embolden it? How does this align with our ideas of autonomous care and logistical infrastructure, or must these be revised or adapted to this new moment?

The practical hybridity that this moment makes possible has already begun to bear fruit. Car caravans have been mobilized to jam traffic and show support for striking Target workers and prisoners and detainees rebelling against their conditions behind the walls. The causality works both ways, as we saw in Arizona, where such caravans have inspired those inside to rise up. We have seen the gathering of forces despite social distancing to remember the dead and expose the kidnapping of migrant children made possible by the cynical collusion of progressive nonprofits with the expanding border regime. These actions have shown that, contrary to the lesson that pandemic governance aims to instill in us, survival is *not* the exclusive reigning value for all of us. Despite the very real danger of the virus, there are still risks worth taking—and *not* in defense of the economy.

IV.

In his letter from Santiago de Chile, Emilio is right to remind us not to overlook the territorial specificity of our situation in all of this. Where I live, some youths raised here seem skeptical of the reality of the pathogen, no doubt fueled by our relatively low recorded infections, whereas further north, indigenous youths on the reservation are losing loved ones at alarming rates. We see the West Coast states making pacts to ensure supply chains, Republican and Democrat governors smuggle tests away from the prying eyes of the Fed's, as central and southern Illinois renews its call for a referendum to secede from Chicago...

Are these the first signs of a real balkanization of the United States? If so, our response to fragmentation and fissure cannot be to mourn or reconstitute the decrepit national totality, yet neither can we allow a division to occur along racial or ethnic lines, as the far-right imagines it. Instead, as our friends in Mexico recently wrote, we must redouble our efforts to fully inhabit our specific territories in dignified and collectively powerful ways. At the same time, we must establish and maintain communication and dialogue between our various experiments in different parts of the continent, so that our territorial differences can resonate and inspire one another along the way. The regular correspondence of these letters contributes to this sense of connection and common purpose across our far flung territories.

V.

What is coming may not have the look and feel of a shocking “moment” of the sort we are used to intervening in. A long-reaching and profound crisis demands a different conception of time and opportunity, and this must begin by accepting that, on some level, what we are experiencing is irreversible. If we are to weather it well, we must remain on the lookout for the aberrant coalitions it makes possible: new mixtures, new sources of confidence among the exploited and dispossessed of this world.

—Dakota
5/20/2020

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